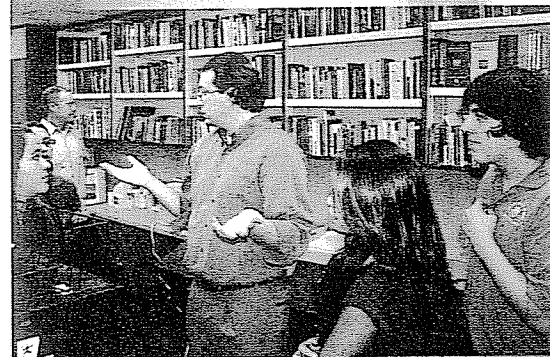


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Last August, when most Palmer Trinity students were still on their summer vacations or returning to campus only for a few hours of sports practice a group of 21 dedicated young writers reported to Room 226 for two days of training in grammar, sentence structure, paragraphing, revision, proofreading, and many other aspects of what's necessary to become an effective tutor at PT's new Center for Writing.

On the door leading into the cozy home of PT's writing center there is a sign bearing the mission statement of the Center for Writing. It reads: "To support and cultivate academic and creative writing throughout the Palmer Trinity community; and to encourage a lively and ongoing discussion about what makes good writing."

After two semesters of strong growth, the Center added another 11 tutors in the spring, bringing to 33 the number of seniors, juniors, and sophomores who make up the tutoring team. With this many tutors, the Center will be able to meet its goal of being open for all students, grades 6 through 12, every day for every period, as well as before and after school.

Long a familiar presence on college campuses, writing centers have started popping up on high school campuses in recent years. As a college preparatory school, Palmer Trinity strives to teach its students how to write effectively. With the support of Mr. Murphy and English Department Chairs Bill Johnson and Adrianna Truby, the Center for Writing opened for students in all grades on Monday, August 28th, at the start of the second week of classes.

At the end of the first semester, tutors at the Center helped students with almost 200 assignments ranging from college applications, essays for English, History, and Religious Studies, as well as work for middle school and ESL students.

As the prospective director of the Palmer Trinity's writing center, I spent a week of my summer break at Stanford University at a workshop run by the International Writing Center Association, attending by 60 educators from around the world and run by a handful of leading experts in the field.

Last year, when we started working on the project of setting up the writing center for Palmer Trinity, I had a million questions. It was almost overwhelming, this process of recruiting and training tutors,

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designing and building a physical location, and creating a basic set of practices and procedures. But the people at Stanford, many of them who had started centers for their own colleges and universities, were supportive and interested in helping as much as they could. I think the urge to lend a hand is inherently part of the culture of what writing centers do.

Although virtually all writing centers operate under the supervision of professional educators, the lifeblood of an effective center is what happens between students – that is, in their conversations about their essays and papers. In many ways, writing centers work because students are in charge of the writing process – not teachers. As Peter Elbow has observed in his classic, *Writing Without Teachers*:

The commonsense, conventional understanding of writing is as follows. Writing is a two-step process. First you figure out your meaning, then you put it into language. Most advice we get either from others or from ourselves follows this model: first you try to figure out what you want to say; don't start writing till you do; make a plan; use an outline; don't start writing till you do. Central to this model is the idea of keeping control, keeping things in hand. Don't let things wander into a mess. The commonest criticism directed at the process of writing is that you didn't clarify your thinking ahead of time; you allowed yourself to go ahead with fuzzy thinking; you allowed yourself to wander; you didn't make an outline. The "outline and thesis first" approach is often misdirected instruction for young writers, and, for some of them, completely paralyzing.

In the teaching of writing, often too much attention is paid to the ideal form, the finished product and not on the process. When students work with students, talking outside the classroom and the authority of the teacher, the process becomes highlighted and, as a result, demystified. As Elbow puts it, "Control, coherence, and knowing your mind are not what you start out with but what you end up with. Think of writing not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message." The tutors at the Center for Writing understand that writing is a concentrated form of thinking, and is a process directed towards finding meaning.

Virtually all of the tutors at PT's Center for Writing know enough about grammar and mechanics to write clearly and well. The Center does not necessarily provide a proofreading service or check a paper's grammar or spelling – although the tutors can certainly handle those

tasks. Rather, the tutors are encouraged to focus on drafting and research, revision and editing, always in conversation and reflection with the student who has come through the Center's door asking for help. In the drive to get quick results both students and teachers often lack the patience to engage in the early stages of the writing process. Good writing is less often written than rewritten, and it usually takes years to learn how to write well.

It's my belief that, as the weeks and months go by, more and more students will visit the center and have a positive experience – not just in terms of getting a good grade, which, in the long run, is secondary to what we do. I hope students who work with the Center for Writing will learn a little bit more about how to become the most effective writer they can be. Our goal is to create an ongoing process of learning that, year to year, is the result of the most consistent and supportive teaching that students will find anywhere on campus – and that teaching will come from the students themselves.

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PERSPECTIVES